

By Alan Mauldin

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MOULTRIE — The motive of the shooter who killed six in Arizona is unknown, but the tragedy should serve as an occasion to lower the bitter political discourse in the country, U.S. Rep. Sanford Bishop said.

Bishop, D-Albany, who represented Colquitt County for many years until redistricting in 2007, said that direct physical threats are not a common occurrence.

The shooting Saturday in Tucson that left six dead and wounded 18 others, including U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, was “devastating, and it should be devastating to every American,” Bishop said. “She is a friend, a colleague in the (conservative Democratic group of) Blue Dogs. First and foremost my prayers are with Congresswoman Giffords — Gabby, we call her Gabby — her family and staff, and all the other victims.”

While physical threats are rare, Bishop said that the level of political discourse has coarsened, particularly during the debate on the health care bill passed last year.

“There was a lot of angst and a lot of vitriol communications directed at our office and at other offices,” he said.

While there will always be policy differences, Bishop said that Congress should find a way to work together.

“Our discourse and our manner of dealing with each other ... is a very sad commentary on our body politic,” he said. “We have to keep pushing, we have to debate, (but) do so in a way that preserves our democracy.”

Bishop said that he will continue to meet with the public but may have more security.

“It’s part of our job to meet with constituents,” he said.

Jared Laughner, 22, who is accused in the shooting, reportedly has not been talking with law enforcement and there is no indication that the shooting was politically motivated.

The political climate in the country has been heated over the years, but not at the level seen today, said Charles Bullock, a political science professor at the University of Georgia. At least not in recent memory.

“It’s certainly more contentious than it would have been 30, 40, 60 years ago,” he said.

The country’s politics include U.S. Sen. Preston Brooks, a Democrat from South Carolina, using a cane to beat Republican Sen. Charles Sumner on the Senate floor in 1857 in the period leading to the Civil War, Bullock said. In 1884, accusations were made that Grover Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child.

“I don’t know if it actually came up in a debate,” Bullock said. “It got injected into the political commentary.”

Not too long ago members of Congress would cross party lines after work and hang out, maybe have a drink, he said. That is no longer the case, and could contribute to the current atmosphere.

“Members don’t stick around as much, so they don’t get to know each other,” Bullock said. “That could lead to some of the hard feelings. When they knew each other, they could be agreeable while disagreeing with each other.”